AN HOUR WITH T'AI SHU, MASTER OF THE LAW

BY CLARENCE H. HAMILTON

IT happened unexpectedly. When my young Chinese friend and I strolled over to the Buddhist Lecture Hall that morning through one of the valleys of the dreamily beautiful Lushan mountains our intent was merely to ask a question and then be off again. For this lecture hall had none of the charms of the ordinary temples of China to lure our fancy. Here were no up-curved gilded roofs nor quiet flag-stone court. No shaven priests paced their solemn procession to the accompaniment of droning chant and fragrance of ascending incense. Here no vast, golden Buddha looked down in passionless pity through half-closed lids from some high altar. No, none of all that. There was only a straight-roofed, single-storied modern building wherein was a plain little hall furnished with rough wooden benches and a speaker's desk. Much like a school-room it was except for the three little images of Buddha that partly converted the lecturn into an altar. All that drew us to the place was the knowledge that eminent Buddhist scholars sometimes expound their doctrines here. Our purpose was merely to inquire when they could be heard and then continue our morning's ramble. But, as I said, we ran into an unexpected experience.

The hall was empty when we entered it. But at the sound of our voices there soon emerged from one of the side guest rooms a single young monk clad in the long, grey dignified robe of his order. Evidently he was a student. In answer to our query he informed us that the lectures for the season were over.

"But the chief lecturer," he went on, "is still with us. He is remaining for a while to give some advanced instruction to a few select students. You may not hear him lecture publicly but he is

still to be seen personally. Do the honorable guests wish to meet him? He is T'ai Shu, Master of the Law."

The monk T'ai Shu! The very soul of present-day Buddhist reform! For several years we had heard of this flaming youthful spirit, arising with strange brilliancy from the embers of the ancient faith; of the outcome, so unwonted in monastic circles, of his three years of meditation at the sacred island of Pootoo, whence he emerged to be preacher, teacher, editor, propagandist. We had heard of his schemes for an ideal monastery, for a system of Buddhist schools and colleges, for reforming the priesthood. We had heard and marvelled at so much executive energy evolving from so deeply quietistic a tradition and environment. In days when most of China's youth were pouring thought and effort into the political and social travail of their country T'ai Shu was conspicuous for the devotion with which he lavished the years of his young manhood in the spiritual conflict of spreading Buddha's law. And now to meet him face to face—that would indeed be an experience worth having. But the suddenness of the opportunity was also disconcerting. For before meeting such a personage we would have preferred to have a chance to collect our thoughts and frame a few questions on some of the deep themes of Buddhism. Wang and I looked at each other. Should we go in or not?

The student monk watching us divined our doubt. "Fear not to enter the presence of the master," he said, "T'ai Shu is ever approachable." So saying, without waiting for our formal assent, he signed to a brother monk who had appeared in the meantime, to announce our presence to the teacher.

In a moment more we were ushered into the modest little reception room. The walls were bare. In one corner was a light bamboo frame with shelves whereon rested a few Chinese books and pamphlets. Gracing the center of the room was a plain round table of common wood at which were drawn up the ceremonious straight-backed chairs, uncomfortable reminders of more formal Manchu times. By the side of an inner door opposite the entrance stood our host, T'ai Shu, already present to greet us.

"The Master of the Law is before you," said our guide and retired. The monk returned our bow with courteous dignity. Then as he straightened up his manner took on at once the natural gra-

ciousness that quickly dispelled our first embarrassment and characterized his attitude during our whole time with him.

"Welcome," he said, advancing to meet us, "Let us sit together at the table." After we were seated the servant poured tea, that eternal offering of respect to the guest in China, and we were ready for our conversation. My friend Wang acted as interpreter, for while T'ai Shu and I partly understood each other's language we each used our own to express ourselves.

As the interview progressed we had opportunity to observe the personal appearance of our host. T'ai Shu is a young man, not above forty years of age. A mustache and horn-rimmed spectacles cause him to seem somewhat older than this when seen at a short distance. But near observation reveals an almost boyish youthfulness of countenance. His round cheeks and clear complexion, untouched as yet by signs of weariness and care, suggest the enjoyment of excellent health. He is of medium height and, I should judge, rather robust of build, though this last was not easy to determine on account of the voluminous folds of his monkish robe. The spots burned on the scalp and the rosary about the neck betokened the avowed priest. It was in the eyes chiefly that we could read the maturity of the man. Dark, thoughtful eyes they are, alive with quick intelligence yet ever suggestive of inner repose—the eyes at once of the scholar and the contemplative mystic. In manner he was quiet and composed during the interview, using no gestures. His utterances in clear even tones flowed easily, simply and directly as though from some inner fountain of thought and formulation whose plenitude made it unnecessary to pause and search for appropriate words.

After T'ai Shu had learned that as a teacher of philosophy in the University of Nanking I was interested in Buddhist systems of thought as well as others, our first words were concerning books. The young reformer wanted to know what writings of his faith interested his occidental visitor. Myself, in turn, was interested to learn what he considered the best volumes for a Westerner to read. The interchange was technical and I need not trouble the reader with it further than to remark that he favored the reading of books which deal with the Vijnanavada. Buddhism's highest philosophical school which teaches the doctrine that all that exists is only consciousness. Then I said,

"I understand, T'ai Shu, that you are a leader in the reform of Buddhism." (The monk's head inclined in gesture of deprecating humility.) "Do the ideas of your reform rest back for authority upon any one of these ancient classics?"

The dark eyes glowed for a moment and he smiled, somewhat amusedly I thought, as he answered, "The ideas of my reform are exceedingly simple. They are first, to remove the unnecessary things that have gathered about the original essence of Buddhism and second, to make application of this latter to present-day conditions. For this one hardly needs the authority of a book."

Then, leaning back in his chair and extending from the great sleeve of his robe a shapely hand which he rested lightly upon the table he fixed his deep gaze full upon me and put the question which the mere fact of my presence as a Westerner had evidently stirred in him from the beginning. "Do you think," he said, "that Buddhism will penetrate and spread in the West?"

The question came as a surprise. I did not know that T'ai Shu included the West in his purposes, though I had long known of the universal claims of Buddhism itself. But after all, it was natural, considering that he is an ardent propagandist as well as reformer. I essayed an answer.

"If the truth that is in Buddhism," I said, "can be put in a form that the Western mind can understand it has a chance of spreading, as does all truth eventually." Then I thought of the images and the elaborate ceremonies I had witnessed in the temples and added: "But I do not believe that the forms and rites of the religion as these have been developed in the Orient can ever be taken over by the West any more than it is likely that purely Western forms of Christianity will survive in the East."

"Forms and ceremonies," the monk replied, "are but incidental. It is the truth that matters." I learned afterward that T'ai Shu himself does not believe the temple idols have any power, though he would not do away with them in his reform because he believes it is necessary for the common people to have some image to which they can tie their thoughts.

Then he told us that at the present time in Peking National University where he had given a series of lectures there are seven or eight young men who are carefully studying Western knowledge and languages with the dominant purpose of fitting themselves to

lecture on Buddhism before the people of the West. When I said in reply that Buddhism as a philosophy is already studied in Western university centers, that even as a religion it has some temples in California, and that Japanese monks have already been known to lecture there he replied eagerly, "Yes, that is well known to me. But Buddhism in California is for the Asian peoples residing there. Our purpose is not to spread the doctrine of the Buddha before those who already know it, but to carry it far and wide among the people of the West who yet are ignorant, particularly of the Northern Buddhism such as we have in China and Japan."

"But you say," he went on, his thought still busy with his first question, "that the truth of Buddhism must be made conformable to the Western mind. Let me ask if you think that the Western mind is by nature favorable or unfavorable to Buddhist truth."

This question was a poser, for we were both of us using large terms which we had not defined and I was not sure of what he meant by the real truth or essence of Buddhism. But there swept across my mind the thought of our philosophies of striving, achievement, mastery in which so much that is characteristic of the modern West has found expression. I remembered Fichte's "moral will," Hegel's "Absolute" battling through all the conflicts of the world to self-consciousness, Bergson's *Elan Vitale,* Nietszche's "Will to Power," and the pragmatic ideal of control through "Creative Intelligence." Against all this rose the thought of Buddhism's emphasis on contemplation, meditation, purification of the heart and the recognition of the emptiness of the phenomenal world as necessary elements in the solution of the problem of life. The two thoughts ground hard against each other.

"I do not think," I said to T'ai Shu, "that the dominant values cherished by the Western mind are very favorable to Buddhism as I understand it. The West values striving, achievement, reformation in the concrete outer world of nature and human affairs. But Buddhism seems to me to exalt contemplation, meditation, the quest for inward peace and poise—a type of achievement indeed, but one which is subjective and mystic, which tends to still the restlessness of endeavour in the external world. That Buddhism could appeal to a majority in the West is most doubtful. There are those, however, in the West who find its dominant tendencies too much for them. Such find the thought of ceaseless striving a

burden and long for peace and rest. Such are likely to have the mystic taste most sensitive to the values of Buddhism."

A graver look deepened on the thoughtful countenance of the monk when my words were interpreted to him, as though some oft-recurring but not very happy reflection were stirred. "But has not Western striving," he said, "resulted in a European War? It would seem to me that after such an experience a larger proportion of the Western people must feel the need for something like Buddhism. Surely after such a catastrophe they will the more willingly listen to us. Mere striving cannot be the final word."

To have replied adequately to this remark would have involved us in a discussion that would take us far afield from T'ai Shu's own remarks concerning the relationship of Buddhism to the problems of the West. There were many things to say about the West's own ideas as to the way out. But I wanted to hear the monk develop his own thoughts, so at this point I remained silent. His next question was not long in coming.

"I understand," he said, "that now the West is troubled at another point, that it feels keenly the conflict between science and religion. How is it? Do the people there believe more in science or in religion?"

"Your question, O Master of the Law," I answered, "is not easy in the form in which you put it and would require many words in reply. But my belief is that the hearts of the people as a whole incline to religion. Among the intellectual classes there is awareness of incongruity between traditional religious dogmas and the scientific view of the world. And it is true that of those deeply versed in science there are some who declare it necessary to discard religion. But there are others of the same group who find that their knowledge of science does but lead them to an insight into yet deeper truth in religion.

T'ai Shu made reply with an air of assurance. "It is my conviction," he said, "that the doctrine of Buddha can heal this wound in the heart of man today. Buddhism and modern science have separate origins but their central view is essentially alike. He who loses religion through science can learn how to find it again through Buddhism. In this also I believe we have a message to the West."

What did he mean? Was it that he traced an analogy between

the popular scientific conception of a universe governed by a system of impersonal laws and the Dharmakaya of the Mahayana doctrine, that "Body of the Law," which is the ultimate being, existent from all eternity, of which the Buddhas of all the aeons, so they say, are but the incarnations although itself is not a person? There might be some similarity there. Or was he thinking that one who had lost confidence in prayer might yet find spiritual poise in the practice of Buddhist meditation? Or was it that reading about certain scientific ideas he had unconsciously transformed them for himself until they were assimilated to Buddhist notions, and hence saw a greater resemblance than a non-Buddhist would? His words aroused a bewildering array of conjectures.

The obvious thing to do would have been to ask him to explain. But this in the nature of the case would have required a great extension of our interview and time for this was lacking. For even while he was uttering the last words the curtain at the door was lifted and the entrance of another guest warned my companion and myself that we must bring our conversation to an end. There was nothing for it but to pass the point. But there was one question which I wished to ask him before we left. So far nothing had been said concerning the relation of Buddhism and other religions and he had passed silently over my single reference to Christianity. I wished to know what would be his feeling, as reformer and propagandist within one of the world's great religions, toward humanity's other systems of spiritual aspiration. To call out his general attitude I framed a rather sweeping question.

"Tell me, T'ai Shu," I said. "What you think will be the condition of religion in the future mingling and interpenetration of the civilizations of the world? Will all religions tend to draw together into one, as some think, or will each preserve its separate identity, friendly indeed to all the rest but ministering particularly to that type of temperament most attracted by it?"

For the first time in our conversation T'ai Shu hesitated. Possibly he sensed the presence of another query behind the highly speculative question asked. "On this point," he replied, "I have no opinion as I have not studied into the matter."

"Of course," I persisted, "no one can know surely what the future will bring forth. But what is your hope?"

His reply was frank and sincere. "It is my belief," he said,

"that Buddhism has enough variety in its many aspects to meet the needs of all temperaments and classes of people. Nevertheless it is possible to think that all religions share in some central core of truth to which each forms in its own way a separate gateway."

He had answered both my inner and my outer question. As a scholar he might recognize points of reconciliation between the different world religions. But as a practical reformer he believes it his task to be the missionary of his own religion even to the ends of the earth, which for him means the peoples of the West.

With this we rose, paid our parting respects to the gentle Master of the Law, and withdrew from his presence.